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EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Cultural Studies

Vol 10(1) 5–12; 1367-5494
DOI: 10.1177/1367549407072966
www.sagepublications.com

Televising history

The past(s) on the small screen

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During the 1990s, history programming made for television increased exponentially in both North America and Europe. As Vivian Sobchack noted, the decade was marked by 'a peculiarly novel "readiness" for history among the general population', which she ascribed in part to their awareness of the potential in future for the present to be commodified and represented as the past (Sobchack, 1996a: 4). Certainly, along with an increase in programming, the 1990s saw a proliferation of different genres across television which has continued into the current decade, into which historical representations continue to be inserted. It is pertinent, then, to ask how we get the kind of history we do on television and what kinds of representations of nation, gender and identity are offered to the 'general population' through these programmes. The contributions to this issue attempt to do so from a comparative, European perspective.

The growth in TV history programming also led to revived interest among UK and US scholars and a continued interest in other European countries. In Germany, for example, where scholarly comment on history programming began in the 1970s, interest has been maintained for the last three decades.[1] However, despite this, in many cases debate about television history has not developed greatly since the 1970s (Kuehl, 1976; McArthur, 1978; Watt, 1976), and has remained couched in terms of the medium's inability to do 'proper' history. For example, the historian Jeremy Black's recent book *Using History* (2005), on the use of the past outside the academy, provides an extremely interesting and nuanced analysis of the 'private sector' of filmmakers and history TV programming alongside museums and popular history books. However, his comments often relate to the extent to which such representations are 'ahistorical' and rely greatly upon fictionalized or otherwise misrepresented individuals, groups or encounters. Perhaps, then, this reflects the 20th-century Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's concern that the historian's role as 'myth-slayer' should not be compromised by what Richard Johnson describes as 'the postmodern designation of History as "fiction"' (Black, 2005: 29; Hobsbawm cited in Johnson, 2001: 281).

A recent edited collection which goes beyond debates about 'good' and 'bad' TV history is Graham Roberts' and Philip M. Taylor's *The Historian, Television and Television History* (2001) which is described as part of a 'multi-disciplinary historical study of television' (Roberts, 2001: 2). However, the contributions to the volume were written mainly by historians and media producers, resulting in an emphasis on television production and evaluation of individual programmes. Similarly, David Cannadine's *History and the Media* (2004) includes contributors involved in the industry, whether from media production or history. Only a tiny proportion of the contributions to either book come from scholars representing other disciplines, such as film studies, television studies and cultural studies, or from other 'critical outsiders'. Some of these alternative viewpoints are represented in this special issue, allowing consideration of the role of television in producing and disseminating knowledge about the past. In addition, several recent works have discussed the representation of the past outside the academy alongside other historiographical developments. These include the Lambert and Schofield collection *Making History* (2004), in which the (historian) editors divide their colleagues into those who have been prepared to work with filmmakers, and those not inclined to do so, suggesting that these are the only factors determining which historians, and which histories, appear on screen. More recently still, the presenter/historian Tristram Hunt has suggested that social historians should marshal public interest in the past, using 'engaging and relevant formats' such as television, which again infers straightforward access to the television screen (Hunt, 2006: 844).[2] This issue suggests some alternative interpretations.

The edited collection *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* by Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, also published in 2001, does draw its contributors from history, film, communication and television studies as well as media practitioners. The goal of the collection is 'to better understand television as a popular art form, an evolving technology, a business and industry, and a social force of international proportions' (Edgerton, 2001: 10). However, with few exceptions, the focus is on the US, which this issue aims to balance by considering contemporary television programming in Europe and the role played by TV in creating and maintaining collective memory and identity. The same can also be said of the 'Television as Historian' special issues of the US-based journal *Film and History*, published in 2000, which include scholars from a range of disciplines, but almost all are based in North America and their contributions focus almost entirely upon US programming.

Despite these absences from much published material, it has become apparent that an international and interdisciplinary field of study into history on television is emerging, especially in Europe. As Richard Johnson commented when considering what cultural studies might want from history, different disciplines 'come to share a cultural agenda,

but pursue it in their own ways' (2001: 278). Thus it seems particularly appropriate that a cultural studies journal should publish the work of scholars analysing history on TV from a range of disciplinary perspectives including history in a period when, as Johnson suggests, there is 'increasing practical rapprochement between history and cultural studies' (2001: 278).[3] Furthermore, many of those working in the field are new scholars, and this too is reflected in this issue which, refreshingly, has allowed us to publish the work of recent doctoral graduates alongside that of eminent scholars. Through an analysis of television, form, aesthetics and production, questions of memory, national and public commemoration and identity, such scholars bring new perspectives to television studies from a range of fields, opening new avenues and methods of research into television. Johnson asserts that 'all disciplinary specialisms include knowledges and perspectives that ought to be available outside the narrower band of practitioners' (2001: 278), and individual specialisms also benefit from external perspectives. The range of scholars contributing to this collection allows comparison of the use of the past on television to depict national identity across several European nations.

Some of the articles were given originally as conference papers at the 'Televising History: the Past(s) on the Small Screen' symposium held in July 2005 at the University of Lincoln. This interdisciplinary and international conference, part of the University of Lincoln's 'Televising History' project, founded in 2004 by Ann Gray and funded from 2006 to 2010 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, examines in various ways the production and consumption of history on television, including the relationship between this form of public history and academic history, and the role of the 'professional' historian and of producer/directors as mediators of historical material and interpretation. The symposium allowed scholars from a range of backgrounds and nationalities to discuss the representation and implications of history on TV in their respective countries. Key themes which emerged, and which are also apparent in the articles published in this issue, include national and regional identity, narrative and national memory.

The development of scholarship around narrative forms an interesting parallel to scholarship on TV history. Although, as Margaret Somers points out, in the 1960s and 1970s many historians rejected narrative as a representational form, and many continue to criticize television history programmes for what they perceive to be an over-reliance on narrative rather than social process,[4] scholars in other disciplines sought to reconfigure the concept in radical ways, allowing it to be used to understand the social world (Somers, 1994). As with TV history scholarship, it blossomed in the late 1970s and the work of eminent scholars such as the historian Hayden White, as well as that of others influential in the field of cultural studies, spans both fields. In 1981, White's work on narrativity in the

representation of reality was published in the collection *On Narrative* alongside that of Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida (Mitchell, 1981).[5] His discussion of the 'Modernist Event' and its particular challenges to traditional historiographic narrative was included later in the Sobchack collection *The Persistence of History* (1996b; see White, 1996). Clearly, narrative theory has benefited greatly from the influence of historians, philosophers and film theorists, among others, and itself has influenced scholars in a range of fields. As the programmes discussed by contributors to this issue tend to follow narratives around identity and memory, White's work, among others, has enabled contributors (although perhaps not all commentators) to think of historiography, whether traditional or televisual, as being 'about arranging and telling stories, not about delivering objective truth', closely associated with 'the formal pathway by which the historian's or author's agency, including political and moral values, enter the narrative' (Sobchack, 1996a: 4; Johnson, 2001: 281).

However, it is important to remember that social narratives, which may include television history programmes, cannot be made at will. As Somers suggests, 'there is only a limited repertoire of available representations and stories'. Perhaps even more significantly for this collection of articles, the kinds of narratives that predominate are 'contested politically and will depend in large part on the distribution of power'. The extent of the possible repertoire available to an individual or group 'is always historically and culturally specific'. Female subjectivity and social class are particularly 'limited' narratives in this respect (Somers, 1994: 629–30). The research conducted by Ann Gray and myself, discussed in this issue, has suggested that this can mean that female historians are less likely to feel that they are being treated fairly by programme makers; it may also mean that women are under-represented as national storytellers, as black and Asian scholars may be also.

On a national level, both James Chapman's and Tobias Ebbrecht's articles consider the stories and memories in a nation's repertoire, told as part of a developing genre in history programming, the drama-documentary. Ebbrecht, writing from a German perspective, considers the VE Day 60th anniversary in Germany and elsewhere, with its 'ensemble of social activities that re-dramatized the historic event', describing this as 'historical event television'. He suggests that televised accounts have become part of collective memory, and questions the ethical and political implications of the way that such stories and histories have changed over time, and the ways in which, for example, footage has been used seamlessly alongside dramatic reconstructions. Asking what sort of idea of Nazi Germany is presented to the German television audience, he cites Anton Kaes' work to consider how this TV history and its audience relates to a changing German collective memory.[6] Chapman, too, notes the extent to which history programmes offer a revisionist perspective on the British historical experience of the Second World War, and suggests that the ideological and commercial

needs of co-production partners 'determine to some extent the content and nature of the final product'. Similarly, he sees some programmes as 'impos[ing], through the didactic method of a voiceover commentary, a preferred meaning onto the events', possibly reflecting public opinion of recent political events in the UK and US. Evidently, the narrative available is also limited to the intentions of programme makers.

Although dealing with representations of different historical periods, and writing from the perspectives of different nations, both Sonja de Leeuw and Emma Hanna consider issues of representation, memory and national identity in their contributions. Addressing the representation of key aspects of Dutch history during the Second World War, de Leeuw considers the ways in which documentary film as a site of memory has constructed the memory of the Shoah in the Netherlands 'by rewriting history through representations' and in so doing has reshaped collective memory. She notes that since the late 1980s there has been 'a renewed interest in telling stories about the past and the Shoah in particular'. By analysing the narrative strategies of several Dutch documentary films produced between the late 1980s and late 1990s which refer to the Shoah, de Leeuw contends that this provides an opportunity to question 'representational strategies', particularly historical representation, while also demonstrating the role of the Shoah in shaping collective, national memory and history, over time. Hanna also considers collective and national memory in her analysis of the impact of the first modern documentary series about 1914–18, *The Great War* (1964). Considering how British television has remembered the First World War, and how its audience responded to this remembrance, she asserts that although much research has focused on the study of commemorative sites and rituals, the memory of both world wars has occupied a central position in television. By considering a television programme first broadcast more than 40 years ago to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the start of the Great War, she provides an extremely useful analysis, contrasting the motivations and responses of programme makers and audiences with their present-day counterparts, a subject also discussed by Ebbrecht and Chapman.

Like Hanna, Alexander Dhoest's contribution allows comparison of Flemish television programmes made in the 1950s and 1960s with those of later periods. He considers the response of the audience to the broadcast material. While Hanna uses archived letters from the 1960s, Dhoest relies upon the memories of the audience. His is also the only article to consider solely television drama but despite the difference in genre, the issue of identity, both national and regional, is again apparent. Noting the common assumption that European television fiction is connected strongly to national identities, he suggests that, instead, television fiction may be seen to produce images of an imagined national community. Seeking to locate this in viewing processes, Dhoest asks whether viewers use domestic drama to reflect on or form a (sub)national identity, and if TV images

form or confirm cultural self-images. Using oral history research with audience members, he seeks to analyse the discursive creation of memories and communities both within and outside the interviews, and asserts that although some critics have viewed such historical dramas as highly selective, demonstrating the values of the social élite, such reception research may offer insights into the actual meanings of this kind of drama for 'ordinary' viewers, whose perception of it may differ greatly. However, although viewers may be more than capable of interpreting what they see to fit their own worldview, it may still be the case that what appears on screen in the first place is limited by a number of possible factors: technological, financial and cultural. In our contribution about British TV history, Ann Gray and I consider such limitations, as aside from the articles published here, little is known about the processes whereby representations of the past are mediated, shaped and transformed through television, also raising pertinent questions about how narratives about national and other pasts are constructed, distributed and marketed. Using oral history techniques, we sought to gain insights from historians involved in history programming to elucidate the ways in which such scholars interpret their various experiences. From this rich seam of information we focused on two themes: the interviewees' own representation on camera as historians, and their views on the style and modes of address of TV historian presenters. This is analysed with reference to notions of charismatic television personalities and dominant narrative structures, and we suggest that these modes of address and televisual forms offer the viewer particular relationships to knowledge and ways of knowing.

The issue is concluded by Professor John Corner, who acted as keynote speaker at the July 2005 symposium and whose suggestions and insights were invaluable to all who attended.

Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Ann and I are very grateful to John Corner for agreeing to be involved in the 'Televising History' research project as a whole, and for acting as a reviewer and providing the epilogue to this issue, in particular. I would like to acknowledge our reviewers' invaluable help and hard work: John Corner, Patrick Finney, Simon Gunn, Joke Hermes, Joanne Hollows, Richard Kilborn, Juliette Pattinson, Michael Pickering and Brian Winston, and also that of the editors of the journal, particularly Ann Gray, who originated the idea of a 'Televising History' symposium, and provided a great deal of support and advice while compiling this special issue.

Notes

1. See Knopp and Quandt (1988), which includes contributions by British and French scholars including the TV historian David Starkey, and the Reimers and Friedrich (1982) bilingual collection which includes contributions from both British and German scholars. See also Feil (1974), an early example of German TV history scholarship.

2. Hunt (2006) does, however, acknowledge very briefly the lack of female presenters, and the paucity of programmes dealing with women's history.
3. See Johnson (2001) for further details of the strained relationship between cultural studies and history during the early decades of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
4. Ongoing research with historians involved in TV history programmes highlighted this as a particular area of contention; they often called for a less rigid alternative to the 'beginning–middle–end' structure (see Bell and Gray, this issue). Other historians, including Jeremy Black (2005), assert that this is understandable when most of the audience are not scholars, adding that not all programmes or historical films leave out social process.
5. See Johnson (2001) for further elaboration of the influence of Ricoeur on cultural studies since the 1980s (see, for example, Ricoeur, 1991).
6. Ebbrecht's article provides an interesting parallel to that of Mark A. Wolfgram (2006), who recently suggested that the growth in representations of the Holocaust in German and other TV and film during the 1980s opened a 'narrative space' for those discussing their experiences of national socialism and led to a significant national reinterpretation of the Third Reich.

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